JAPANESE 20th CENTURY CULTURE

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IMPERIAL JAPAN AND ITS FATE (1912- 1945)

Overview

The three decades that followed the end of the Meiji period witnessed dramatic economic and social advances and reversals, which reflected both the vicissitudes of the global order— for instance, World War One and the great depression of the late 1920s— and concurrent developments within Japanese society. These would culminate in a protracted military adventure that yielded catastrophic consequences. A product of the Meiji modernization project, Japan's imperial system and military establishment were a dominant presence. Yet the 1920s was a time of progressive political and social movements and a burgeoning marketplace for popular entertainment and leisure.

The contradictions and tensions inherent in Japan's imperial nationhood are in a sense entirely congruent with the nation's historical development— in particular, the legacy of the Tokugawa authoritarian regime and its enforced insularity. But the Japanese people understood their world and essentially wished no more than to be able to live good and comfortable lives. How, then, are we to make sense of this interesting 'first act' of a modern Japan typically presented as a drama in two acts— the prewar Act One (1868-1945) and the postwar Act Two, with its own complex history?

The Taishô Years (1912-1926)

The fourteen-year reign of the Taishô Emperor was built upon the remarkable economic and industrial expansion achieved during the Meiji years. Of particular note is the rise of the great industrial cartels— the *zaibatsu*— which served as engines of development and, ultimately, military expansionism. Having acquired colonial territories— Taiwan and Korea, most notably— in the wake of the two Meiji-era wars, Japan had become a legitimate imperial state— Asia's first— and its leaders continued to promote the so-called *kokutai* ideology of Japanese exceptionalism. State-sponsored Shinto served as its chief vehicle. World War One brought important economic gains, but the resulting inflationary spiral resulted in serious rioting in 1918. A far more serious shock was the great Kanto Earthquake, which essentially leveled the city of Tokyo and environs on September 1, 1923. The massive rebuilding project eventuated in a city with a much-improved urban infrastructure— including a subway system that would spur the city's growth. On the diplomatic front, the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act signed into law in the U.S., which essentially barred Japanese migration, served as a serious affront and fomented anti-American sentiment.

On the domestic front, Taishô society was marked by distinctly liberal and progressive trends, together with a booming domestic economy and rising living standards. People's rights were advocated, and a relatively unfettered left-wing activism yielded a number of Marxist and socialist coteries and an active proletarian literature movement. Universal male suffrage was granted in 1925, whereby the electorate expanded from 3 million to 14 million. What became

referred to as 'Taishô Democracy' was marked by a dramatic expansion of mass media and popular entertainment. Countering the Meiji-era ethos of female subservience, epitomized by the dictum of 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryôsai kenbo*), a liberationist discourse emerged during the Taishô era, inspired by the feminist Hiratsuka Raichô (1886-1971). But the nascent feminist movement was countered by deep-rooted norms supporting traditional gender roles.

Reminiscent of the Tokugawa-era pleasure seeking of the *chônin* townsfolk, Taishô society— principally young city dwellers with disposable income— reveled in leisure and self-indulgence. Modeling the American Roaring Twenties as represented in Hollywood movies and popular magazines, young people flocked to the popular dance halls, jazz bars, and coffee houses sporting stylish hairdos and the newest fashions. The so-called '*moga*'— modern girl— became a Taishô cultural icon, and Japan's obsession with the 'Western look' would be brilliantly satirized in Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's 1924 novel, *Naomi*.

Sports such as baseball, tennis, golf enjoyed widespread popularity, as did tourism. Mountaineering in the Japan Alps became a major attraction, and foreign visitors to Japan increased in number. Moreover, the arts scene was vibrant across the spectrum, with Japanese music, literature, painting, and theater reflecting the influence of international trends and fads. Moreover, a dramatic expansion of Japan's publishing industry in the 1920s led to the mass marketing of inexpensive books and periodicals, which fed a demand for lowbrow literature and trendy magazines.

In part as a reaction against the rising tide of Taishô popular-culture and liberal trends, the government passed a conservative Peace Preservation Law in 1925, which sought to reinforce nativist ideology and stem what was regarded as an alarming rise of individualism and political leftism. In retrospect, this would be an ominous development.

The Early Shôwa Years and the Fate of Empire

The death of the Taishô Emperor in 1926 ushered in a new era, overseen by the Shôwa Emperor Hirohito, whose sixty-three year reign would encompass an epochal period in the nation's history. The imperial state took a distinctly militarist turn in 1931, with a staged invasion of Manchuria that served as a prelude to the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. Japan's colonial presence in Manchuria expanded dramatically, and an increasingly militarist political agenda on the home front impelled the nation toward war with China. The 1930s was marked by ultra-nationalist rhetoric, anti-Westernism, and the rise of patriotic organizations and propaganda.

A turning point occurred on February 26, 1936, when the ultra-conservative 'Imperial Way' faction (*kôdôha*) staged a coup— involving targeted political assassinations— that sought to purify the nation and restore the Emperor to his rightful place as sovereign. The attempted coup failed, but it both reflected and reinforced the relentless chauvinist agenda.

With the 1930s, the expressions of Taishô liberalism were systematically undercut by government decree. Left-wing activism was essentially banned, and those regarded as political radicals were essentially forced to renounce their subversive ideas, in a policy of 'conversion'

called *tenkô*. Those who refused to do so suffered harsh consequences; for instance, the proletarian author Kobayashi Takiji (1903-33) was taken into police custody and ultimately murdered by the authorities.

Paralleling the situation in Weimar Germany prior to the rise of the Nazi regime, life in Japan during the early Shôwa years appeared surprisingly normal. The cultural and social scene was quite active, with crowded movie theaters, baseball stadiums, and the gamut of popular entertainments. Girlie shows and other erotic fantasies were in vogue, and the nation was gaga over the 1934 visit of the New York Yankees and Babe Ruth. This, however, would be the calm before the storm.

War

In July 1937, Japanese soldiers crossed the Marco Polo bridge into Chinese territory and fomented a military encounter that led to a full-scale invasion of China— the second Sino-Japanese war. A national mobilization of troops ensued, and Japan embarked upon a war that would last eight years and expand well beyond the territory of China. The military regime essentially mandated the *kokutai* dogma of 'pure Japanese spirit' in 1937 and renounced Western influence and ideas— all the while building up its military arsenal. In 1938, the Konoe cabinet issued its plans for a 'Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,' which sought to justify Japan's military expansionism under the rubric of a benevolent pan-Asianism.

In 1940, Japan joined the Axis powers, allying itself with Germany and Italy. A year earlier, President Roosevelt, concerned about Japan's military incursions into the South Pacific, had authorized a blockade of Japanese shipping. The stage was thus set for a confrontation between the two nations, which came in the form of Japan's preemptive attack on Pearl Harbor. December 7, 1941— the day that Roosevelt famously declared would 'live in infamy'— ushered in the Pacific War, and essentially sealed the fate of Japan's imperial adventure.

The Pacific War engaged the entire Japanese nation— both those on the front lines and on the home front. But despite the official ideology of superiority and invincibility, Japan was woefully outmatched by the resources of the American and Allied forces. Anti-Japanese sentiment in the U.S., together with serious security concerns, led to the internment of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast, as dictated by Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066— a regrettable chapter in American history.

For many, Japan is of interest only in the context of World War Two, and accounts of the Pacific theater— including a spate of war films that demonize the insidious Japanese enemy— are legion. Japan's wartime expansion into Burma, Indochina, Borneo, and the Philippines is well documented. The Battle of Midway (1942) can be said to have turned the tide, insofar as the Japanese navy would be rendered incapable of resisting the Allied naval forces. Japan's access to vital resources dwindled, and the homeland was subject to increased air attacks as of 1944. *Kamikaze* missions, invoking the time-worn invincibility legend, were doomed to failure. The carpet bombing of Tokyo by B-29 Super-fortresses in March of 1945 essentially laid waste to the Japanese capital; indeed, few major Japanese cities were spared. The Allied advance led to the horrendously bloody battle for Okinawa, as prelude to a strategic assault on the home islands.

But rather than pursue what was judged to be an unacceptably protracted and costly war with a fiercely determined enemy, the product of the top-secret Manhattan Project— in the form of two atomic bombs— were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August of 1945. The 'shock and awe' of nuclear devastation brought to an abrupt end the war that Japan's military leaders had long known was lost. On August 14, the Emperor announced the nation's unconditional surrender in a memorable radio broadcast— the very first time the Emperor's voice was made public. The formal surrender documents were signed on September 2, aboard the U.S. battleship *Missouri.*

Having been comprehensively defeated, with its major cities laid waste, millions of its people killed and maimed, and the dreams of empire reduced to rubble and radioactive waste, the Japanese people faced an unimaginably bleak future at the hands of the enemy occupation force. The story of the nation's postwar recovery and reinvention is yet another chapter in the improbable Japanese saga.

Readings

Dower, John, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon, 1986)

Gordon, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan* (Oxford, 2014), 138-223

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 235-303

Discussion Questions and Topics

In the same sense that the Tokugawa period can be said to have paved the way for the Meiji Restoration, Japan's imperial state can be said to be an outgrowth of Meiji ideology and institutions. Comment on this proposition.

In the final analysis, are we to regard imperial Japan an aberration, which required the 'corrective' of defeat in war? How are we to assess the role of the Emperor here?

Weimar Germany has been mentioned as an analogue of imperial Japan. How closely do they resemble each other?

Our obsession with the military history of modern Japan and its representation in film and other media has been noted. Do you agree with this view? What aspects of prewar Japan have you been drawn to? What areas would you want to pursue?

Excerpt from Tanizaki Jun'ichirô, *Naomi* (Chijin no ai, 1924)

> Naomi, who was only in fifteen when I met her, had a very Western name, and her resemblance to the motion-picture actress Mary Pickford made her look very Western as well. This isn't just my own biased view. Many others say so, even now that she is my wife. It must be true. And it's not only her face— even her body has a distinctly Western look when she's naked. I didn't learn this until later, of course. At the time, I could only imagine the beauty of her limbs from the stylish way she wore her kimono.
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> --Based on the translation by Anthony Chambers (Vintage International, 1985, p 4)

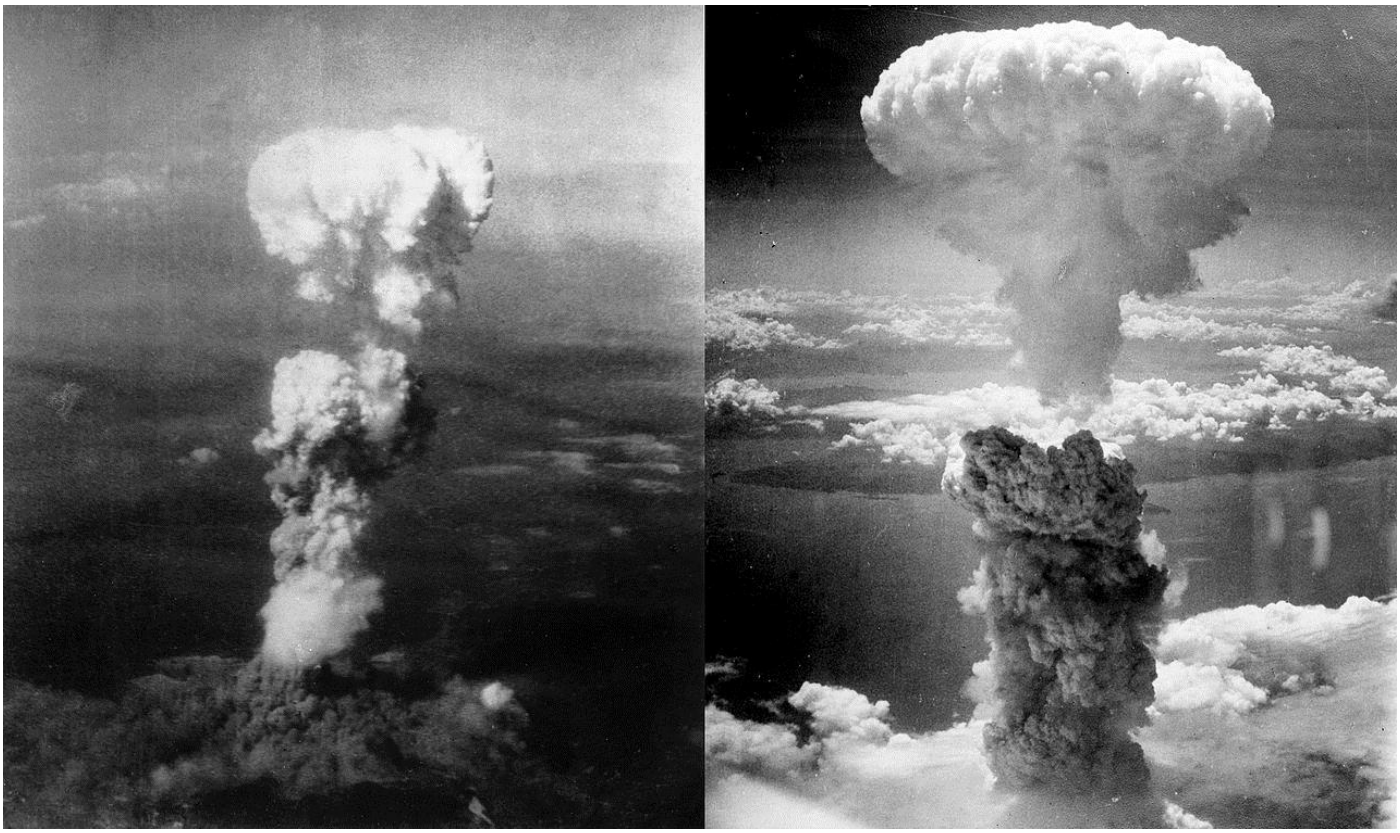
Images

View of central Yokohama following the catastrophic 1923 earthquake (Wikipedia)

Photograph of Ginza Line subway car, early Shôwa period (Wikipedia)

‘*Moga*’ (Modern girl) image, from a 2012 Japan Society exhibition, *Deco Japan: Shaping Art and Culture, 1920-1945*

Photography of Puyi, puppet emperor of Manchukuo (Wikipedia)



Twin nuclear mushrooms of August 1945: over Hiroshima (left) and Nagasaki (right) (Wikipedia)